



## Strategies to Help Children Manage Stress



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Studies of children’s reactions to stress reveal the adaptive potential of children for many kinds of social and environmental stressors. Researchers emphasize the resilience of children, stemming from their personal dispositions, family supports and community networks, and their great ability to meet and to deal with stress.

As a first principle when dealing with children who have experienced a disaster, remember that most victims of disaster are normal, but severe stress may temporarily disrupt their functioning. Most victims function adequately after the catastrophe, even though their ability to cope may have been impaired by the situation. Victims may show symptoms of physical or psychological stress but they do not view their condition as pathological.

Second, remember that the family is the first-line resource for helping children and should be considered before involving other treatment resources. When treatment is indicated, the basic unit for services, when possible, should be the entire family, and not just the individual child. The presence of a stable and caring parent is a crucial form of support for a child traumatized by an environmental crisis.

Third, workers in disaster should seek out users of their services rather than wait to be sought out. Outreach teams can use disaster assistance centers, schools, Red Cross evacuation centers, and other community centers to provide information on the availability of services for children and families. These teams can also go to homes, mobile centers or other relocation areas. The media can be helpful by informing the public of available services.

In examining the response of a community mental health center to a major school bus and train accident, it was found that reaching out quickly to the victims and primary care givers during a crisis can avert the development of post-traumatic symptoms. This form

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and Ami O'Neill



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of active intervention can be contrasted with the conventional wait-and-see approach of traditional community mental health services. School-based mental health counselors emphasize the importance of encouraging the school-aged victim of disaster to participate in daily activities, involving teaching staff and other adults to provide emotional support and opportunities for communication, assisting the child in confronting the crisis and adjusting to loss, encouraging honest appraisal of the situation, and organizing schools to provide consulting services.

One theory to keep in mind when dealing with stress related to disasters is attachment theory. Throughout life, young children are more resilient if they have become attached to at least one significant adult. Being able to trust at least one significant adult pulls them through stressful times. Secure attachment is a foundation for healthy development and healthy mental functioning.

Although attachment exists all of the time, it is particularly evident when a child is ill, tired or afraid. Children seek out that person who makes them feel safe and secure. Stress occurs when that person is not available either physically or emotionally.

Separation is the flip side of attachment. Any indication that separation may occur causes stress. Children going into a new childcare situation, to a new class or to spend the night away from home can be stressed due to separation. Children might want to bring an attachment item along, such as a blanket or toy, to ease the separation from parents.

In more severe disasters, the threat is more serious, and the greater the chance for actual separation or loss. Sleeping alone in a strange place, being separated from parents and other family and losing toys and pets are ways children are affected during a disaster.

Parents should be assured that they are not spoiling their child by responding to his or her fears. If feelings are buried and not recognized, then they may surface later. Significant adult availability and responsiveness can help children through the stressful time following a disaster.

There is no easy way to know when children need to be referred to a qualified professional for continued intervention. Below is a list of behaviors that could indicate when a referral is appropriate:

- Child verbalizes or indicates extreme anger, desire to hurt self or others, suicidal ideation/wishes, past delinquent acts.
- Consistently expresses self in somber or self-deprecating terms.
- Repeated reliance on dark colors and themes in artwork.
- Repeated acting out aggressively or violently.
- Developmentally inappropriate behavior—regression, precociousness, or repeated inappropriate sexual behavior.
- Repeated isolation of self.
- Fire setting and other destructive acts.
- Repeated and deliberate harming of animals.

## Helping Children Handle Disaster-related Anxiety

### Preschool age children

Behavior such as bedwetting, thumb sucking, baby talk or a fear of sleeping alone may intensify in some younger children, or reappear in children who had previously outgrown them. They may complain of very real stomach cramps or headaches, and be reluctant to go to school. It's important to remember that these children are not "being bad." They are afraid. Here are some suggestions to help them cope with their fears:



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- Reassure preschoolers that they're safe. Provide extra comfort and contact by discussing the child's fears at night, by telephoning during the day and with extra physical comforting.
- Get a better understanding of a child's feelings about the disaster. Encourage children to draw pictures about the disaster. Discussing them will offer insight into each child's particular fears and concerns. You can work to structure children's play so that it remains constructive, serving as an outlet for expressing fear or anger.

### Grade-school age children

These children may ask many questions about the disaster, and it's important that you try to answer them in a clear and simple way. If a child is concerned about a distressed parent, don't tell the child not to worry—doing so will just make him or her worry more.

Here are several points to remember with grade-school-aged children:

- False reassurance does not help this age group. Don't say that disasters will never affect your family again—children will



“Don’t be afraid to say, ‘I don’t know.’”

- know this is not true. Instead say, "I'll always try to keep you safe," or "Adults are working very hard to make things safer." Children's fears often worsen at bed time, so you might want to stay with the child until he falls asleep to make him or her feel protected if you are taking care of a child in the evening.
- Monitor children's media viewing. Images of the disaster and the damage it has caused are extremely frightening to children, so consider limiting the amount of media coverage that they see. A good way to do this without calling attention to your concern is to regularly schedule an activity—story reading, drawing, movies, or letter writing, during the news hour.
  - Allow them to express themselves through play or drawing. As with younger children, school-age children sometimes find comfort in expressing themselves through playing games or drawing scenes of the disaster. Allowing them to do so and then talking about it helps you to find out what happened to them in a gentle way.
  - Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know." Part of keeping discussion about the disaster open and honest is not being afraid to say that you don't know how to answer a child's question. When such an occasion arises, explain to the child that disasters are very unpredictable, and they cause things that even adults have trouble dealing with. Temper this by explaining that adults will always work hard to keep children safe and secure.

## Adolescents

Encourage young people to work out their concerns after the disaster. Adolescents may try to downplay their worries. It is generally a good idea to talk about these issues, keeping the lines of communication open and remaining honest about the financial, physical and emotional impact of the disaster on your family.

Adolescents typically are going through an identity phase of development. Their sense of "who they are" at this point may be tied to possessions and friends. Having to transfer schools may be traumatic and telling friends they are living in a shelter equally difficult. Offer support and encouragement that things will get better. It may help adolescents to work on repairs or assist with programs to help prevent additional damage in the future.